[Peddler Jenny]

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DATE: AUG [??] PEDDLER JENNY

Hardly a season rolls by the Wincoski valley without the homely appearance of Peddler Jenny. In sleet, snow, rain, or scorching sun, few have not heard her high-pitched, nasal chant. “You buy something today?” she sings. “A spool of tread, maybe? Everybody need tread to home. Black tread for the [men's?] suits, white tread for the ladies and babies. You buy today, hah?”

She came ploughing down the business street, her rubber-soled, canvas shoes scuffing the slush. She was an ageless, brown, dumpy creature in yards of ankle length, printed calico, and she pushed an antique wicker baby carriage that was piled high with [wares?]. A rusty safety pin held together the collar of faded coat sweater, the lower half gaped over her soft abdomen. A scarf, the brown of her skin, bound her head to skull-smoothness, and the powdery November snow that was falling progressed unhampered from crown to face. The snow clung for a moment to the hairy upper lip and the creases of her pudgy nostrils, and then subdued by skin-heat it settled to splotches of shiny wet.

The carriage wheels creaked to a stop. She wiped her moist cheeks and nose with green mittened hands, and pressed the woolen palms for a little time to the dark puffs that encircled her black eyes.

She bargained: “You buy one spool of black tread, one white, and one blue. I make four cents profit and I talk to you all you want. You don't lose nothing anyway - everybody got to need tread to home sometime. All right?”

After she had unwound the scarf, shook it, and spread it over the bulging carriage, we went into the hallway of a nearby building and sat on 2 the stairs where Jenny could keep an eye on the carriage through the glass doors.

“That carriage I got for nothing. The owner throw it away; I pick it up.” Her flabby mouth smiled, her eyes stared straight ahead, black, cynical, shrewd. A half dozen [gaudy?] rings pressed into the flesh of her fat fingers. On the back of her left hand a blue cross was tattooed. She sat on the step with her legs wide apart, each hand gripping a knee, and half buried in the folds of calico. “I find the carriage two years ago in the city dump. I go near there that day to pick blackberries. Somebody don't want it; I put my two pails of berries in it and I wheel it home. After that I use it all the time summer and winter. It is better than to carry the suitcases, they pull the arms out of me. I go around from town to town to sell. Most the time the busman let me take the carriage to ride with me, but sometime I leave the carriage with a friend— I got friends in all the towns— and take only the suitcases. When I come back the next time the carriage is waiting for me.

“In the summer it's nice to travel around to earn money, but in the winter, no. I get cold. Winter for old people is a good chair and a hot fire. But not for me. I got to work to keep alive. I learn a lot from the thirty-five years I peddle around here. I learn it is the poor people that got the good hearts. In the winter I go to the poor people a lot to sell. If I go to the house near dinner or supper time they offer me something hot. Coffee, tea, or soup. It helps me to save my own money, and it warm up my bones. To my own people, the [Syrians?] here, I don't go so much. We see different. They're high class, I'm low class. They don't say so, but I feel they say so in the minds. In town, down the other end, is a pretty good bunch of Syrians. They got fruit stores or grocery 3 stores, most of them. They stay in one place, them, and they build a house and a family. They don't go on the road like me. They got kids now that are doctors, business men, hairdressers. My kids, half of them I don't even know where they are. My husband, I don't know where he is neither.

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“I wasn't always with no money like I am now. Two years ago I have $3000. All money I earn hard. One penny when I sell a spool of tread, two cents when I sell a yard of 'lastic. My husband was never a healthy man. Tall, skinny like a bean-pole, he never work', he was at home always just to feed the kids and sleep. He let me work and earn the money. He never bother with other women, but, hah, just because he is too lazy. All he give me in thirty-five years is kids and kids. After they are all gone, he go, too. Two years ago he complains all the time that unless he go back for a visit to the old country he will die. Coughing all the time. He isn't much use to home with the kids grow' up and gone, so I give him $500, to go and come back. I give him the money but I feel all the time that I won't see him again. It's true. Two years ago in May he went away. Maybe he's in Syria, maybe he's just a few miles away, maybe he's dead, - I don't know.”

She shrugged off her husband's memory, and yelled out to two children who were lingering beside her carriage, “Go on, you kids! Get away. Go on home!”

“Kids look at me like I'm a gypsy.” Peddler Jenny said. “Some of the old people do, too. I don't care. Two fathers back my family is gypsies in the old country, I guess. My father, he sell on the road like I do. He used to show me the gypsy [signs?], like leaves pointing a certain way in the path, or small branches, and little hills of sand like anthills with word in the top to point the way where the people have gone. I don't know them no 4 more. It seem like a million years ago.

“I have an [uncle?] peddler who is killed outside the walls of Jerusalem when I was a small kid. He was a crooked peddler, ready to cheat all the time. Over there each peddler got a certain route to go, each one will stick only to his own route. This uncle maybe he cheat on a route, I don't know. Anyway, they find him outside the wall of Jerusalem one morning, two hundred miles from home. He was stuck to the ground, flat on the back, dead. A long sharp stone is struck through his neck and into the ground. When they find him, there is a wild dog on top of him lapping up the blood. Somebody has steal all his peddling stuff, - kettles, rope, cloth, knives. He's got nothing, just his clothes. Dirty, old clothes. But he is

such a crooked, bad man that they bury him just as he is in the old rags. My father say, 'Good for him. Even if he is a brother, good for him. He's crooked.'

“My first boy is like that cheat uncle. Blood don't change. It go from the first ones in the family all the way down. If you got a bad one in the family some day it will show. My first one start to steal and cheat in school. They don't want him there. Then he chops ice for the ice company, but when he go to sell the ice he don't give the money to the company, he keep it in his pocket. He is put in a school for bad ones for a year. When he come home, he run away. I don't know where he is now. Maybe dead, maybe alive; just gone like his father.

“Before that first boy was born I know he was bad. I ache all the time. In front, in back, and in the head. I told his father, 'You wait. This one will be bad just like his cheat uncle. I feel it. I know it.'

“You're crazy,' he said to me.

“You wait and see,' I tell him. 'Look at my front, how it come out to 5 a point, just like a devil horn. I seen plenty like that in the old country. They're all born bad. I know it.'

“He said to me 'you're crazy,' but he don't want a bad one no more than me. So together we wrap me up tight in many yards of the cheapest cloth I peddle, so to push the point down like this.” Jenny demonstrated by pushing down hard on her soft abdomen. “It don't do no good. That baby is born bad. He even cheat for a born-day. He's born three weeks before he's got right to be, quick in the night when it's snowing hard and blowing. We got no time for the doctor. My husband's sister is good for times like that. Sara help' a lot of babies in the old country. She just put the hot, wet cloth on my front all the time till the head come, and when it's all come she just flop the baby up on my front end and she sit and wait for the rest.

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“For my other seven I have the doctor. Two of them die as soon as they're born. [Hah?], all that money to the doctor for nothing! It ought to be the law, half-price if the baby don't live, or give the next one free. If I sell you rotten tread, I give you the money back or give you one spool free, don't I? Why not the same if the baby is born dry?

“After the first bad baby the rest come easy. Every time I go around and peddle my goods till the day I'm ripe. If it's born in the summer I got to work quick and carry the baby around with me so I can nurse it any time.

“Three kids are in New Hampshire, the other three I don't know. And they don't know where I am. I don't care. I got no steady home now. I stay wherever I feel to stay. All my life I peddle, I don't mind to die on the job. I got enough money for a coffin. I like to feel I buy my last house with my own money. Not let someone else give it to me like I'm a [beggar?]. 6 I'm poor, I peddle, but a beggar, no.

“I tell you once I have $3000. I give my husband $500 to go to the old country, and that leave me $2500. Only two years ago. A man I know who I think was honest and had a good business head ask me to lend it to him [in?] business. We make out papers with the lawyer. It says on the paper he will pay good interest, so I give it to him. I don't see that money no more. You think I get back any? I don't see one cent again, No sir, he lose it all, and I lose it all. All the pennies I save for over twenty years!” Peddler Jenny made a low, moaning sound, and rocked her head slowly in her hands. “For over twenty years I save all those pennies till they are dollars. One penny on a spool tread, two cents on a yard of 'lastic, four or five cents on a yard of cloth goods, two pennies on a card of buttons. Pennies, pennies, t'ousands and t'ousands of pennies to make $2500, and then to lose it all!”

Her mouth parted in a mirthless grin. “Now I'm back just like I was when I come to this country. No husband, no kids, no money. No nothing. Just me and my peddling goods.

“Tomorrow I go to Montpelier. I got streets there I don't go near, like here in this town. The rich houses I stay away from. They look at me and my carriage like we are dirt. Years ago I used to stay in this town longer than in other places. I used to go to the houses up on the hill where the quarries are. I make a little more money then. The women up there always used to buy from me. They don't come down to town so much then, and they were glad to see a peddler. They used to buy a lot. Now they got cars. They come to town to buy. I don't blame them. If I have a car I would like to ride around the country all the time. It's better than to stay 7 at home. Me, I don't like to be in four walls like a jail. I got to be out. I got to be on the road. That's why I like to peddle. I earn my money on the road.

Jenny could not forget the loss of her money. “All my life I save and save pennies, and then to lose it all. You want to hear something? Never have I buy me a dress all made in the store. No sir. About one dress a year I have, and I make it myself from my own cloth goods, and it cost me not even a dollar. I save and save for what? To lose it all. I walk the street in rain, and snow, and I could have buy me a little car with all that money. If I think of it much I feel I will go crazy.”

The street lights made faint [arcs?] in the early dusk. Snow was still falling. Larger, softer flakes that melted as they touched the pavement.

“I got to go now,” Peddler Jenny said. “I know a Spanish house where maybe they will give me something hot. The woman always buy cloth to make hankerchief for her husband. He's a stonecutter and he wants the big, big handkerchief.” She raised her bulk slowly, rubbing her haunches, and standing there for a moment as if she wanted to say more. Then with a silent shrug she pushed open the doors and went out to her snow covered carriage.